Social Networks and Digital Lives | SOU44021

Year	Senior Sophister
ECTS Credits	10
Contact Hours	22
Pre-requisite	
Semester	1
Module Leader & Lecturer	Prof. Anne Holohan
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Module Outline:

Digital technologies shape every aspect of our lives but are dominated by a narrative of techno optimism and a rejection of any contextual critique that questions the 'objectivity' of technology. This module tackles that techno optimism and shows that it is not the technology but the logic of the system in which it is embedded that determines what technologies are developed, who benefits and who is disadvantaged, and determines what we see as inevitable or as something that needs to be subject to scrutiny and regulation. We see how bias is built into every technology, a lot of the time unconsciously. But once awareness is raised, the continued rejection of steps to address it renders it conscious bias that 2 is being perpetuated in favour of the logic of profit and wealth, as the powerful tech companies argue it is not their job to address societal problems.

However, the societal problems are inextricably linked to the logic of the system that facilitates their dominance and wealth extraction. To understand the real-world embeddedness of technology and the logic that dominates, we explore the institutional culture of Silicon Valley [shorthand for the technology industry in the US and beyond as it sets the norms for other tech hubs around the world to follow], and its evolution over the last 60 years. There are competing narratives to the dominant neoliberal meritocratic myth shaping the technology industry. This latter storyline describes some actors in the economy as the true 'innovators', wealth creators and risk takers, and sees the State as a wealth extractor or distributor. In fact, the State has played a crucial entrepreneurial role, and all workers, in the labour force and unpaid reproductive workers, create value, but a disproportionate amount of the gains, and credit, has gone to the 'innovators.' We link the structural forces and the actors in the industry – the government, the universities, the companies, the entrepreneurs – and show how their interaction continues to shape the production and use of technologies.

Module Learning Objectives:

On successful completion students will:

- Know the impact of digital technologies on material lives, economically, politically, and socially.
- Understand the concepts of unconscious bias, systemic bias, and intersectionality.
- Understand the role of big data in contemporary society and the different ways digital technologies perpetuate and entrench existing racial, gender and class inequalities.
- Understand institutional bias with specific reference to the institutional culture of Silicon Valley and the role of government, universities, companies, and entrepreneurs.
- Understand the core debates around the impact of digital technologies on the self and relationships.
- Understand the core debates around the impact of digital technologies on politics and the economy.

Assessment:

- 20% 15-minute student presentation.
- 80% 3,000-word essay.

Recommended Reading List:

There is no textbook for this module. The library is getting almost all the books which have chapters assigned here as e-books, and the most heavily used ones will have a license to allow multiple readers at the same time. In addition, I have scanned or uploaded several of the readings. If you have difficulty accessing any reading, let me know in good time before the tutorial.

All of the following books are available in paperback (except for Johnson and Acemoglu) that you may want to purchase, though all are available in TCD library:

- Shoshana Zuboff (2019) The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. Profile Books: London.
- Cathy O' Neill (2017) Weapons of Math Destruction. Penguin. Crawford, Kate (2021 Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence. Yale University Press.
- Ruha Benjamin (2019) Chapter 5 'Retooling Solidarity and Reimagining Justice' in Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code. Polity Press: UK.
- Jaron Lanier (2014) Who Owns the Future? Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Johnson, S., & Acemoglu, D. (2023). Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity. Hachette UK.